

Home » Publications » E-seminars in history

## 'I Am No Longer Human. I Am A Titan. A God!' The Fascist Quest To Regenerate Time

Roger Griffin (Oxford Brookes University, UK)  
1998

This paper is the written-up version of a talk given in November 1998 at the Institute of Historical Research as part of the seminar series *Modern Italian History: 19th and 20th Centuries* organized by Carl Levy. As such it inevitably covers several issues of great complexity in a highly condensed manner, a sort of academic shorthand, which risks striking the initiated reader as superficial and simplistic. I would thus stress that what follows is presented in the spirit of an exploratory research seminar paper. Accordingly it should be read as the preliminary surveyor's report on a site staked out for future investigation, and not as the fruits of an exhaustive excavation. I thus would welcome comments on the general thesis which I outline here, as well as suggestions for further primary and secondary sources which may help me refine it in future.

### The 'revolutionary festival'

Some two decades ago Mona Ouzof's *Festivals and the French Revolution*[1] provided impressive testimony to the centrality of myth and ritual to the dynamics of even a 'modern', 'rational' revolution purportedly carried out in the name of Enlightenment principles. Now that at long last some scholars are taking seriously the proposition that Fascism[2] as well as Nazism[3] attempted to create a new type of culture, it seems an appropriate moment to consider whether the conspicuous ritual, theatrical component of both Fascism and generic fascism can be illuminated by the concept of 'the revolutionary festival'. This paper explores the thesis that the temporal dimension of such a concept has a particular heuristic value when applied to fascist ideology and practice, despite the radical differences which clearly separate the largely spontaneous explosion of populist mythic energies unleashed by the French Revolution from those deliberately engineered in ordinary citizens by Fascist and Nazi elites, whose attitude is epitomized in Hitler's statement that 'Mass demonstrations must burn into the little man's soul the conviction that though a little worm he is part of a great dragon'. [4]

The notion that there can be qualitatively different experiences of time is pivotal to such an investigation. The issue of subjective 'times' is clearly one of enormous psychological and anthropological complexity, and is by its nature susceptible to any number of conceptual schemes. Yet it is significant that not only countless poets, [5] but also several major Western intellectuals suggest that a dichotomy between 'ordinary' time and 'special' time persists into the age of modernity. Durkheim, for example, not only distinguished between 'sacred' and 'profane' time, [6] but devoted considerable attention to 'effervescent assemblies' in which individual, anomic time gives way to a collective sense of belonging and purpose. [7] Similarly, one of the effects which Max Weber attributed to the progressive 'rationalization' of all aspects of reality in the modern age was 'disenchantment' (Entzauberung), the erosion of a magic dimension of reality as the traditional binding element within society, which allows it to reemerge capriciously and spasmodically in the form of collective charismatic energies to release human beings temporarily from their iron cage of reason. [8] More anthropologically oriented cultural commentators such as Joseph Campbell, building on Jung's pioneering studies of the 'archetypal unconscious', have explored how mythic consciousness still provides the substratum of 'modern' human experience, lifting individuals out of ordinary time whenever their lives intersect with primordial patterns of mythopoia and ritual consciousness. [9] One of the most influential figures in the investigation of the distinction between profane and sacred time, however, is Mircea Eliade, who in a stream of books has documented the constant recourse by human beings to myth and ritual or irrational cosmologies to stave off the 'terror of history', the invasion of life by the all-consuming *chronos* of meaningless clock time. [10]

Seen from the perspective of such distinctions, the cultural rebellion against the Enlightenment project which gathered such strength from the 1880s onwards in Europe and has come to be known as 'the revolt against positivism' [11] can be seen as the synchronic appearance (too loosely associated to be called a 'movement') of a number of highly idiosyncratic quests to put an end to 'decadence' (i.e. a 'fallen', disenchanted, entropic, private, 'old' time) and inaugurate a 'rebirth', (i.e. enter a 'higher', magic, regenerative, collective, 'new' time). [12] If confined to the experiential sphere of individuals or small groups, this might involve no more than the cultivation of visionary, mystic states of consciousness, or the quest for sources of knowledge and insight neglected by mainstream Western culture. However, so wide-spread was the disaffection with the official cult of material, liberal progress in linear historical time that intellectuals and artists all over Europe were attracted by the idea that their own bid to break free from a stultifying 'normality' was part of a wider impulse, a sea-change in history. They were convinced they were living through a watershed in the evolution of Western civilization. For the individual this was characterized phenomenologically by a qualitative change in the experience of time from the personally meaningless to the collectively significant. The leading figures of the occult revival and many pioneers of artistic modernism fit this pattern. Thus, figures like Madame Blavatsky, Rudolf Steiner, Yeats, Wagner, Stravinsky, Segantini, [13] Kandinsky, Picasso, Van Gogh, and Rilke, and artists in such disparate movements as Expressionism, Cubism, and Surrealism were in their very different ways concerned both with the achievement of 'ecstasy' (states which allowed them to 'stand outside' ordinary time), and with acting as a catalyst to the diffusion of new forms of consciousness to 'save' the West from what they saw as a process of spiritual atrophy. The very notion of the 'modern' was for some infused with a sense of cultural regeneration, the birth of a new age. [14] For example Hermann Bahr wrote in 1890:

It may be that we are at the end, at the death of exhausted mankind, and that we are experiencing mankind's last spasms. It may be that we are at the beginning, at the birth of a new humanity and that we are experiencing only the avalanches of spring. We are rising to the divine or plunging, plunging into night and destruction - but there is no standing still.

The creed of Die Moderne is that salvation will arise from pain and grace from despair, that a dawn will come after this horrific darkness and that art will hold communion with man, that there will be a glorious, blessed resurrection. [15]

An investigation of the European avant-garde from the perspective of its philosophy of time and history would show how deeply bound up it is with the passionate belief that routinized, sclerotic ways of feeling and seeing associated with the age of materialism and philistinism can be transfigured individually or collectively through the awakening of the visionary faculty so that they are attuned to a 'higher' time. Indeed, this could well prove to be the main, if not the only, common denominator which underlies the rich profusion of so many conflicting aesthetics and nuanced visions of reality embraced by the terms 'modernism' and 'avant-garde'.

Occultism and visionary art were not the only channels through which such longings could be expressed in the 'fin de siècle', the very concept of which implied not only that a whole era of values and sensibility was closing, but that another might be opening. Other figures attempted to contribute to the

inauguration of a new time through philosophy and social theory, Nietzsche and Sorel being outstanding examples. Both thinkers looked specifically to (differently conceived) mythic energies rather than reason as the source of the regeneration of history. The extraordinary resonance which their works found among their contemporaries can only be explained by the fact that European culture was pervaded by unfulfilled palingenetic expectancy which demanded articulation. Unlike Nietzsche, Sorel trespassed from 'pure' cultural and philosophical speculation deep into the territory of another major outlet for palingenetic aspirations, namely revolutionary politics. These by definition attempt to create a new time by realizing the utopia of a better society which provides their affective driving force, no matter how systematically they are rationalized in doctrines and theories. [16]

## The origins of Fascism in projects to inaugurate a new experience of time

Locating Fascism's genesis within the context of a European culture saturated with longings to recapture a 'magic' or 'epic' sense of time at the turn of the century throws into relief the fact that it is not reducible to an arbitrary and ideologically vacuous decision made by Mussolini in the spring of 1919 for reasons of personal ambition. [17] Instead, it is deeply rooted in a wave of intense politico-cultural speculation and activism which flooded Italy between 1900 and 1915 much of which centred on the project of national renewal. A sample of this speculation which has a particular bearing on the present topic is an article published on the eve of the outbreak of the First World War under the title 'La democrazia e la festa'. It claims that the fundamental problem of modern life 'was the lack of public festivals, rituals and theatrical elements that could restore an aura of grand spectacle to an increasingly impersonal and individualistic world. Modern people had ceased to believe in Catholicism, but had yet to find appropriate secular substitutes for its festivals. Without religious and seasonal festivals the world had become sad.' [18]

Conventional historians have (perversely, it seems) ignored the hard documentary evidence that Mussolini was part of this subculture long before he became a Fascist. Indeed, it was one particular current of palingenetic agitation, the Florentine avant-garde associated with Papini and the periodicals *Il Regno*, *Leonardo*, and *La Voce*, which exerted a decisive influence on Mussolini's own sense of revolutionary vocation several years before the First World War. [19] In 1935 Mussolini declared to his biographer De Bagnac 'I first had the feeling of being called to announce a new era when I started corresponding with the *Voce* circle.' [20] The writings of some Syndicalists of a theory of Marxist revolution conceived in terms of myth, voluntarism, and the nation rather than socio-economics, determinism, and the Communist International had also helped convert him from an internationalist to a national socialist well in time for him to become an interventionist in the spring of 1915. [21]

But of all the tributaries of ideological energy which influenced the young Mussolini and subsequently flowed into Fascism in its formative period it was Futurism which was the most extreme, both in its rejection of the past and in its belief in the imminence of a renewal which would have an international, but also a strictly national dimension. [22] Futurists conceived their revolution consciously as a metamorphosis in the experience of space and time. Indeed, in the very first of many Futurist Manifestos F. T. Marinetti had written:

We stand on the last promontory of the centuries!...Why should we look back, when what we want is to break down the mysterious doors of the impossible? Time and Space died yesterday. We already live in the absolute, because we have created eternal, omnipresent speed. [23]

Mussolini the national revolutionary, obsessed with idea that a new historical cycle in the life of the nation and of the Western world, was thus very much a child of his age, the product of a cultural climate pervaded with longings for a new society, and a new experience of history. [24] He owed his 'charisma' to his instinctive ability to recycle, synthesize, and re-present myths of the nation's imminent renewal, and hence to embody, crystallize, and give organizational form to the mood of national palingenesis which was 'in the air' breathed by Italy's intelligentsia even before 1915, and was then dramatically polarized and radicalized as a result of its decision to fight in the First World War. The veterans who were to form the back-bone of the Fasci and the *squadre d'azione* were men who had returned from the trenches with the conviction that the war marked a turning point from an old Italy governed by a spineless gerontocracy to a new one led by a youthful, courageous ruling elite. They nurtured heady fantasies of forming the vanguard of a national renewal inspired by the terrible sacrifices which they and their less fortunate comrades who had not survived had made to preserve the honour of their country and defend it from foreign conquest. [25]

The need to explain the rise of Fascism in terms of mythic currents and ideological structures rather than the personal ambitions of Mussolini or the machinations of capitalism is underlined by the profound impact made quite independently on the popular imagination by the ageing poet D'Annunzio when he established his Regency in Fiume as the expression of his own, essentially aesthetic, palingenetic vision of Italy's destiny. Fiume signalled for him and his supporters the country's entry into a new epic cycle of greatness and heroism which would put an end to the pusillanimous age of mediocrity incarnated in the Giolittian era. [26] After the March on Rome had enabled Mussolini to be made head of state with the blessing of the king, both the Nationalists and Giovanni Gentile, as well as lesser known Futurists and Dannunzians, were able to project their own schemes for the nation's renewal onto Fascism, ensuring that new currents of palingenetic myth and the policies to achieve them intensified the momentum of the movement. By the time Mussolini set about creating a totalitarian regime in 1925, the *littorio* or lictor's rods and axe could be seen as symbolizing the radical shift from the leftist rhetoric of San Sepolcro Fascism to an authoritarian, rightist force in which the myth of a reborn Rome now played a dominant role. But it also represented the nature of Fascist ideology itself: a loose alliance of different, and often contradictory, strands of revolutionary nationalism held together in a single-party state prepared to use violence to crush opposition. The force which held them together was the common belief in the imminence of a new age.

If Mussolini was able to dominate this alliance it was partly because he had few scruples about the ideological compromises and contradictions wrought by such wanton syncretism. The core of his own revolutionary drive between 1909, when his profound attraction to *La Voce's* call for cultural renewal can first be documented, [27] and the formation of the first Fasci in March 1919 was little more than the nebulous myth of a new Italy brought about through the agency of 'homines novi'. The significance of the war for him was that it would create a new elite, a 'trenchocracy' and so provide the mass base for such a movement of renewal. [28] The tablets of the old law were crumbling and the new ones were yet to be written. He saw the period leading up to establishment of the Fascist regime as a time not for programmes and doctrines, but for action. [29] His conspicuous lack of interest in providing a definitive doctrine and a cogent set of policies to rationalize Fascism before the early 1930s was not just tactically necessary to guarantee the new regime as wide a support base as possible. It reflected his own deep-seated reluctance to commit himself to a particular version of palingenetic myth. In a way, then, it was the vision of renewal itself which became the linchpin of Fascist ideology rather than any particular set of policies or clearly conceived theory of state. [30]

This vision was deeply bound up with Mussolini's recurrent stress on Fascism's epochal significance in history. The regime was living proof that 'Italy did not exhaust herself in creating its first and second civilization, but [was] already creating a third.' [31] The core of this revolution was not institutional but ethical: Fascist vitalism would lift the apathetic, cynical individual of the Giolittian age into a new spiritual orbit.

'I don't give a damn' (me ne frego)... sums up a doctrine which is not merely political: it is evidence of a fighting spirit which accepts all risks. It signifies a new style of Italian life. The Fascist accepts and loves life; he rejects and despises suicide as cowardly. Life as he understands it means duty, elevation, conquest; life must be lofty and full, it must be lived for oneself but above all for others, both nearby and far off, present and future. [32]

In different permutations the belief that Fascism's creation of a new type of state was the materialization and externalization of a subjective revolution in world-view, values, and national character was a recurrent topos of Fascist thought. To cite just two examples, a chapter on 'Fascism and the Future of

Culture' in a 1928 tome entitled *Fascist Civilization* affirms that what underlay the Fascist revolution was not just a new regime but an entirely new cosmology:

When we affirm the divinity of our beautiful Italian nation we mean by that we are announcing a religious idea in the true sense of the word, capable of creating a whole new development in culture, practical and theoretical via which we can arrive at new conceptions of God, cosmic reality, and human destiny, at a new way of ordering our interior life and external social life.[33]

In similar vein, Giovanni Gentile devoted his inaugural speech to the National Institute of Fascist Culture made on 18 December 1925 to evoking the new force 'which, despite the obstacles in its path, which at times seemed to block its effects, has gradually regimented the whole nation' and 'infused it with a single sentiment: the passion for greatness at any price, at the cost of any sacrifice.'

What has come over us to endow us with this sensibility, the sign that new spiritual needs and new directions are being taken by life and thought?...It is a religious sentiment...one which takes life seriously: really seriously...and no longer separates doing from talking, deed from thought, literature from life, reality from programmes, life and death from the triumph of ideals which we have faithfully served: this is the new spiritual value which Fascism has planted in the Italian soul: it is to these heights that we are now trying raise national culture.[34]

The temporal implications of this 'religious' conception of Fascism are made clear in Gentile's definition of Fascism for the *Enciclopedia Italiana*:

The world seen through Fascism is not this material world which appears on the surface, in which man is an individual separated from all others and standing by himself, and in which he is governed by a natural law that makes him instinctively live a life of selfish and momentary pleasure. The man of Fascism is an individual who is nation and fatherland, which is a moral law, binding together individuals and the generations into a tradition and a mission, suppressing the instinct for life enclosed within the brief round of pleasure in order to restore within duty a *higher life free from the limits of time and space*. [35] [my emphasis]

## The Fascist bid to regenerate time through social engineering

In concrete terms the reordering of 'the interior and exterior social life' of Italians to create a 'new style of Italian life', led to the ritual style of politics which has struck generations of scholars as the outstanding feature of life under Fascism. One of the first academics to draw attention to this aspect of the new Italy was the American Herbert Schneider, who during his study of the regime carried out between 1926 and 1927 recognized the existence of a 'Fascist religion'. Presciently he commented on the fact that 'less subtle and more generally effective' than Gentile's school reforms in winning over youth to the regime was 'the new Fascist art of secular celebrations'.

It is not for nothing that Fascism is so ritualistic. The marches, salutes, yells, songs, uniforms, badges, and what not, are giving a new focus to the imagination of the Italian youth, are linking their social life to political organizations and are filling their minds with political - I will not say ideas, but political - feelings. This is perhaps the greatest of the fascist revolutions. Good Italian youths still go to mass and participate in religious festivities, but their sentiments, their imaginations, their moral ideals are centred elsewhere.[36]

Schneider goes on to note how the Italian calendar was 'assuming a secular structure', citing as examples the way the regime had give certain dates a two-fold mythic significance. Thus March 23, Youth Day, commemorated the founding of the Fasci; April 21, Labour Day, the founding of Rome; May 24, Empire Day, the entry of Italy into the First World War; Sept. 20, Italian Unity, the incorporation of Rome into the Kingdom of Italy; Oct 28, the Fascist Revolution, the March on Rome.[37] In 1931 the regime even introduced a 'Fascist Epiphany' which in Milan included a 'Christmas Day's distribution of gifts in the name of the Duce, to be known as "the Duce's Christmas"'. [38] In this way ordinary Italians were encouraged to experience the unfolding of the Fascist Revolution in secular time as a phenomenon with a transcendental core on a par with the metaphysical reality which underlay Christianity, which also intercalated working days with 'giorni festivi' (also known simply as 'feste', i.e. not just holidays but holy-days or feast days). The outstanding example of this attempt to appropriate a religious concept of time and make it an integral part of the experience of the new Italy was the superimposition over the Gregorian year of a specifically Fascist one. 1922 became year 1 of the Fascist era, and most publications were dated both in terms of Anno Domini and the time which had passed since the March on Rome. In this way Italians were encouraged to feel that Mussolini's conquest of power signified the inauguration of a new dispensation in the history of an eternal Italian civilization.

Some six decades had to pass before scholarship could be said to have gone beyond Schneider's insights into the centrality to the Fascist revolution of the deliberate staging of events designed to create a collective sense of sacred time. Emilio Gentile's ground-breaking *Il Culto del Littorio*[39] meticulously documented the concerted efforts by the Fascist regime to sacralize the state. By inventing an elaborate political liturgy and symbology it sought to create a civic and political religion and hence 'realize a "metanoia" in human nature, whence a "new man" should emerge, regenerated and totally integrated into the community'. [40] Though Gentile does not explicitly dwell on what Fascism's 'political religion' meant for the experience of time, the primary source evidence he adduces demonstrates that some Fascists consciously conceived Fascism as a temporal revolution. Thus Dario Lupi wrote in July 1923:

He who joins us either becomes one of us in body and soul, in mind and flesh, or he will inexorably be cut off. For we know and feel ourselves in possession of the truth; for of all the ideologies, past and present...we know and feel ourselves to be part of the only movement in marvellous harmony with the historic time in which we live.[41]

Gentile's insights are extensively corroborated by Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi's study of 'the aesthetics of power in Mussolini's Italy', which documents the way the fabric of daily life under the regime reflected how it:

strove to produce cultic values and hailed spiritual principles as the basis for the regeneration and renewal of Italian society. Born as a countermovement to the 'lifeless' politics of liberal government, fascism claimed its will to create a new world on the premises of a Nietzschean return to the ideal.[42]

The profound temporal implications of such a project are implicit in her extensive treatment of the central role played by myth in the social and political life of the regime. Occasionally she alludes to them directly, as when she comments on the Futurist concept of war which had such a major influence on Mussolini's thinking:

Because the futurists stressed action and glorified the future, only war could respond to the ideal of a never-ending movement. War embodied the perennial necessity of fighting: *it was a festival* in which the expenditure of energies, almost in an ethnological sense, emphasized life's fullness. As the 'only hygiene of the world', war granted the expansion of human potentialities. It was a purifying bath from which a new person, who perceived the world through categories of action speed, and confrontation, would be born. War would thus clean Italy from passatismo and open the way to future renewal.[43]

Another modern scholar who has fully grasped that the deeper significance of Fascism's ritual, aesthetic style of politics lies in its attempt to mass produce a

qualitatively different experience of reality is Jeffrey Schnapp. His fascinating analysis of the Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution of 1932 shows how it deliberately manipulated the aesthetics of architecture, exhibits, symbols, space, and song, to contrive for the visitor the experience of passing from the chaos of the immediate post-war years to the sublime harmony of the Fascist era. The last room, the climax of the exhibition, simulated a Fascist rally, but no ordinary rally. It was:

a rally of the living dead, a rally taking place in some indeterminate secular otherworld, 'immortal' yet of this world, where history's victims are forever present to each other.[44]

The exhibition therefore did not serve as a memorial to the March on Rome. Rather it was:

a *living* monument capable of serving as the focal point for mass happenings that would mobilize the Italian nation as a whole, from the highest government offices to the factory floor. To this end, the exhibition set out to be revolutionary: new, ultramodern, audacious, free from the melancholy and mourning that usually accompany the remembrance of things past. Instead of simply embalming the movement's origins, it strove to...present fascism's 'heroic era' with such shocking intensity and immediacy that it would almost literally be brought back to life...No sense of loss or discontinuity would divide the past from the present.[45]

If the Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution is taken as the epitome of the regime's calculated bid to transform the nation as a whole then it becomes clear that at the heart of its 'totalitarianism' lay neither the will to power of Mussolini, nor the obsession of conservative or capitalist elites to maintain their grip on the levers of power. Its driving force was the urge to lift the Italians out of the anomic experience of time under liberalism by reconnecting them with the epic life of the nation. Fascism was the medium through which they would be reconciled and reunited with the living organism that was Italy. The Risorgimento would be completed, the task of 'making Italians' fulfilled. Ordinary citizens would for the first time since the Roman era once more be able to participate mystically in Italy, and hence in its imminent destiny to become once again the focal point of world civilization and progress, yet another manifestation of the 'eternal genius' of the race which had produced the Roman Empire, the Catholic Church, and the Renaissance. In the context of such a vision the 'monumental', such a major feature of Fascist (and all totalitarian) art acquires specific connotations. It refers to a cult of remembering practised not in a conservative spirit, but in a revolutionary one: the past is to be remembered in order to regenerate the present and transform the future: a paradox expressed in the slogan of the Movimento Sociale Italiano 'Nostalgia for the Future'.[46]

The academic who has done most to illuminate the specifically temporal aspect of this enterprise is Mabel Berezin. She identifies as the central drive of Fascism as a political ideology its will 'to fuse public and private self' in a new 'community of feeling'.[47] She goes on to demonstrate the vital role played by ritual in enabling ordinary Italians to imagine they belonged to a 'new political community', then, crucially for our thesis, devotes a whole chapter to the Fascist bid to 'colonize time'. Using the case-study of Verona she documents the extraordinary lengths to which the regime went to reshape the experience of time and history itself through a combination of different types of official event which she classifies as celebrations, symposia, commemorations, demonstrations, and inaugurations. In just twenty years (1922-1942) the citizens of Verona could participate in 727 such events, an average of 36 per year, or one every 10 days.

The ultimate purpose of such a systematic intrusion of private time by regime time was the obliteration of the old self, and the making of a Fascist self. The palingenetic thrust behind it emerges clearly from a speech made in Augusto Turati, national secretary of the Fascist Party, in the arena of Verona in May 1926. He told his listeners that the Fascist 'crowd of a million arms, legs and faces had a 'single soul, a single song, and a single hope: Italy in every heart, Italy above every heart.' The Patria was 'a living thing...something truly inside us...If the Patria is the memory of the Dead, then the Patria lies in the will to rebirth and transformation'.[48]

## Nazi Correlatives to the Fascist Bid to Transcend Anomic Personal Time

Given the fact that Nazism shares Fascism's mythic core of palingenetic ultra-nationalism and constitutes a permutation of generic fascism,[49] it is not surprising to find constant allusions in its ideology, to regeneration and rebirth. In a spirit which directly parallels the Fascist conception of revolution, the Nazis set out to inaugurate a new era by reattaching Germans to what Schnapp called the 'intermediate otherworld' constituted by an epic sense of national history. One of Hitler's major biographers records that he was obsessed with:

the concept of a great turning point in the history of the world. A new age was beginning; history was once more setting the mighty wheel in motion and apportioning lots anew[50].

Though Nazism's racial, eugenic concept of the national community meant that this vision was conveyed through discourses distinct from the ones used by Fascism, the premise that the new regime was carrying out a total cultural revolution through which the individual would transcend anomic time is common to both. Thus Hitler's speech on art in his address to the Seventh Nuremberg Rally in September 1935 has striking parallels with Gentile's inaugural address cited earlier:

When the poor human soul, oppressed with cares and troubles and inwardly distracted, has no longer a clear and definite belief in the greatness and the future of the nation to which it belongs, that is the time to stimulate its regard for the indisputable evidences of those eternal racial values which cannot be affected in their essence by a temporary phase of political or economic distress. The more the natural and legitimate demands of a nation are ignored or suppressed, or even simply denied, the more important it is that these vital demands should take on the appeal of a higher and nobler right by giving tangible proof of the great cultural values incorporated in the nation. Such visible demonstration of the higher qualities of a people, as the experience of history proves, will remain for thousands of years as an unquestionable testimony not only to the greatness of a people but also to their moral right to existence.

Hitler went on to ask:

What would the Egyptians be without their pyramids and their temples and the artistic decorations that surround their daily lives? What would the Greeks be without Athens and the Acropolis? What would the Romans be without their mighty buildings and engineering works? What would the German emperors of the Middle Ages be without their cathedrals and their imperial palaces? And what would the Middle Ages itself be without its town halls and guild halls etc.? What would religion be without its churches? That there was once such a people as the Mayas we should not know at all, or else be unconcerned about them, had they not left for the admiration of our time those mighty ruins of cities that bear witness to the extraordinary epic qualities of that people, such ruins as have arrested the attention of the modern world and are still a fascinating object of study for our scholars. A people cannot live longer than the works which are the testimony of its culture.[51]

As in Fascism, the corollary of this project to recreate the 'epic' sense of time felt to be the hallmark of all 'great civilizations' was the creation of all-pervasive political liturgy, its effects reinforced by the extensive use of propaganda,[52] social control, and state terror. As a result the everyday life of Germans - at least of those who were not deemed to incarnate decadence - was infiltrated by the ethos of the Third Reich to the point where it became an act of heroism to keep a firm grip on alternative values, let alone assert them publicly, and even the path into 'inner emigration' was far from easy.

The book that achieved for the understanding of the cultic dimension of Nazism what Gentile's *Culto del littorio* has done for Fascism is Karl Vondung's *Magie und Manipulation. Ideologischer Kult und politische Religion des Nationalsozialismus*.<sup>[53]</sup> In it he records the intense efforts of the regime to develop a political liturgy in order to bring about a subjective revolution in the Germans' experience of time itself. A striking example is the elaborate ceremony, or Heldnischer Feier (heroic celebration) designed by Gerhard Schumann for the 'memorial day for the fallen of the movement'. It was designed to be performed on the steps of the Feldherrnhalle in Munich's Odeonplatz where the November putsch had failed in 1923, thus turning them into an 'altar' and the hall itself into a temple to Nazism. Vondung analyses in detail the texts and ritual choreography of the ceremony, showing how it, like countless other examples of Nazi liturgy, were calculated to generate 'the collective feeling of participation in the permanent revolutionary process of fermentation and in the transcending of individual death through an ill-defined "after-life" within this continuous revolution'.<sup>[54]</sup> As a result:

The 9 November 1923 is interpreted within National Socialist myth as a turning-point at which the old era finished and something totally new began. The verse by Boehme quoted earlier makes this clear: 'The earth died with your death, with your glory our lives begin'. 'The beginning of life' means here the beginning of a transformed, new, essential life, means a quite specific change in the structure of human life, a metamorphosis of the human condition. The vision or prophecy of a process of transformation from an incomplete to a complete existence is a *topos* of historical speculation. Eric Voegelin calls this phenomenon 'metastatic faith'.<sup>[55]</sup>

What Vondung's extremely scholarly investigation demonstrates is that Nazism cannot be fully understood if we ignore its efforts to bring about a sense of 'metastasis' or rebirth, subjectively experienced as moving from a mere 'existence' of incompleteness, of anomie into a qualitatively different historical and personal time of whole, transcendental 'being'.

It is the concern with breaking out of 'ordinary time' and into a collective 'magic time' which presumably predisposed some future Nazis, notably Hitler in his Vienna days before the First World War and Himmler, to flirt with occultist ideas about the origins of civilization and the imminent rebirth of the Aryan super-race.<sup>[56]</sup> Certainly the testimony which Hermann Rauschnig provides of Hitler's conversations over meals suggest that he not only, like Mussolini, harboured notions that he had been called upon to inaugurate a new era, but that for him the forces which would bring it about were of an awesome, almost supernatural power which dwarfed anything imagined by the Vociani in Florence:

We had come to a turning-point in world history - that was his constant theme ... He saw himself as chosen for superhuman tasks, as the prophet of the rebirth of man in a new form. Humanity, he proclaimed, was in the throes of a vast metamorphosis ... The coming age was revealing itself in the first great human figures of a new type ... 'Those who see in National Socialism nothing more than a political movement know scarcely anything of it. It is even more than a religion: it is the will to create mankind anew'.<sup>[57]</sup>

Yet, such a passage does not suggest that the Third Reich was an eruption of occultist energies, however much this notion might appeal to those whose historical imaginations have been corrupted by the *X-Files* mindset to the point where they mistake sensationalist bestsellers such as *The Dawn of the Magicians* for a serious history book<sup>[58]</sup> - in fact Hitler went to some length to dissociate Nazism from occultism.<sup>[59]</sup> What it does corroborate is the important realization that all dialects of Nazism, whether blood-and-soil, militaristic, cultural, or technocratic, shared the belief that there was a higher spiritual and temporal reality bound up with the history and destiny of the race which was hidden (i.e. occult, in a more banal sense) to decadent minds.

When the individual experienced the moment of union with this sublime plane of reality it could produce a sense of ecstatic rebirth whose psychological implications have been explored in such forensic detail by Klaus Theweleit in his *Male Fantasies*<sup>[60]</sup>. One primary source for understanding its dynamics which he uses is Goebbels' autobiographic novel *Michael: Ein deutsches Schicksal in Tagebuchblättern*,<sup>[61]</sup> a Nazi Bildungsroman which traces the transformation of the central character's ennui into a sense of belonging. Commenting on the way the conflict between despair and hope is resolved, Theweleit writes:

At the end of the book, Michael joins the ranks of the 'workers'; he begins to work in a mine. This offers him an opportunity to invoke the intensities of work as a form of intoxication, which, like the blackouts and intoxications of the drill, guarantees 'redemption': 'I have no wish to be a mere inheritor'. The purpose of 'work' instead is to allow Michael to become a new and self-born man within an apparatus which strips him of his ego boundaries. 'i am no longer human. i am a titan. a god!...' If we are strong enough to form the life of our era, it is our own lives that must first be mastered. A new law is approaching - the law of a labour realized in battle and of the spirit that is labour. The synthesis of these three will be internally and externally liberating; labour will become battle and spirit labour. Herein lies redemption.'<sup>[62]</sup> [my emphasis]

Goebbels' novel expresses the subjective dimension of the concept of the 'new man', the homo fascistus which Mussolini and Gentile describe from the outside. To become a fascist is to be stripped of one's ego-boundaries, and thus become ready for absorption into the regenerated national community which will, so fascists believe, one day be synonymous with the nation itself. The moment of conversion to Nazism (which is also described in *Michael* in ecstatic terms) is one of intoxication, of rebirth, of redemption, the transcendence of the old self and the decadent age that produced it.

The thesis that the core experience which the Nazi manipulation of society in all its aspects sought to induce was that of being reborn from meaningless individual time into the epic communal time of the Volksgemeinschaft is fully borne out by scholars working on the minutiae of culture under The Third Reich. Iain Boyd Whyte's reconstruction of the May Day festival held in Berlin in 1936, for example, shows how the whole event was deliberately staged through the creation of liturgical space, the choreography of the crowds, and the enactment of a ritual invented for the occasion so as to superimpose onto a spring festival of seasonal regeneration a Nazi concept of national renewal. For this to happen the pagan custom had to be relocated onto what the art historian Hans Weigert in 1934 had called 'the deepest maternal foundations of blood and soil'. The Nazis' act of mythic appropriation and subversion is epitomized in the fact that a huge swastika crowned the may-pole that day. The painting which subsequently recorded the festival completed the transfiguration of what was at bottom a stage-managed piece of political propaganda into the icon of a transcendental moment in the history of the reborn Volk.<sup>[63]</sup>

More examples of the deliberate manipulation of time in Nazi culture are provided by Linda Schulte-Sass in her *Entertaining the Third Reich. Illusions of Wholeness in Nazi Cinema*.<sup>[64]</sup> In her study of Hitler Youth Quex, for example, she shows how the scene when Heini is drawn away from the communist camp and towards the Hitler Youth camp 'is the film's first encoding of birth or passage into a new world'. The climax of the film in which Heini is killed by communists is shot in such a way as to imply that his death is 'his third and final stage of "rebirth" into a supra-individual, quasi-religious, 'indeterminate secular otherworld', an 'ill-defined after-life':

The film's final montage sequence that follows Heini's death is again of feet, this time masses of feet multiplying Heini's spirit hundredfold, marching towards the spectator, as if to march right of the screen and into life (and death!), depicting retroactively the geographical and spiritual reappropriation of "home", not only for an individual but for a collective.<sup>[65]</sup>

Another Nazi film, *Request Concert*, traced the story of a pair of lovers, Inge and Herbert, whom fate thrusts together at the Berlin Olympics and then wrenches apart when Herbert is called away to fight in the Spanish Civil War. Herbert is able to signal to Inge that he has never forgotten her by having a radio request show play the music they heard at the Olympics when they fell in love. Schulte-Sass's central theme is the narrative effect of setting the

love-story of two individuals, first against the background of the vast physical community forged by the Olympics which not only had unleashed a flood of nationalistic pride, but which in the film come to represent 'a timeless, unsurpassable experience of wholeness, of life as a dream or work of art, that National Socialism constantly aspires to achieve;' and then within the dispersed community of Germans listening to the record requests, thus 'synthesizing the timeless interpellation of music with a timely mystification of the radio's transcendence of time and space'.<sup>[66]</sup> By constantly evoking images of supra-individual wholeness in this way, the Nazi cinema not only aestheticized the Third Reich, but presented reality to the film-goers in such a way that they were encouraged to feel their own lives had been transfigured and subsumed into the epic destiny of a truly imagined and (and ultimately imaginary) community, the Volksgemeinschaft.

Clearly such examples of Nazism's manipulation of time could be multiplied. It would be fascinating, for instance, in the light of recent anthropological work on the significance of Stonehenge as a site for shamanic rituals designed to mediate between natural, human time and the supernatural world of the spirits,<sup>[67]</sup> to investigate the function of the vast ritual spaces which Speer created for the Third Reich specifically for rallies and parades. There would surely be some mileage in analysing the Zeppelinfeld as a ritual space deliberately created as a generator of ancient shamanic energies in perverted modern form. The swirling swastika replaced the archetypal vortex<sup>[68]</sup> as the symbol of access to a higher reality, while Hitler acted as chief shaman attended by lesser medicine-men to induce a collective trance state in the choreographed masses. By bringing out the difference between the genuinely metaphysical concept of reality underlying shamanism and the pseudo-supernatural dimension of 'national destiny', scholars would sharpen the distinction between the connotations of sacred time immanent in authentic religious traditions and experiences and its grotesque travesty in 'state religions'. Nevertheless, what has so often been dismissed as the 'megalomaniac' might prove better understood as a modern equivalent of the 'megalithic' with the preternatural connotations it acquired in Stone Age sacred sites.

In short there is ample evidence to suggest that Nazism conspired to create a sense of festival time, of 'party-time'. Tragically for humanity, the party generating it was not the type associated with the coloured costumes of the Brazilian Carnival, but with the brown shirts of the NSDAP. The contrast between the dance and the march, between the samba and the strains of the Horst Wessel Lied points to the gulf separating a life-asserting community from a community which exists only by creating a demonized Other, and whose vital flame of eternal rebirth is thus lined in the black of death.

### The cult of sacred time in neo-fascism

1945 may have signalled the end of Fascism and Nazism as regimes, but the palingenetic longings which fuelled them have proved remarkably persistent and adaptable in a post-war climate which, at least in liberal democracies, has remained profoundly inhospitable to revolutionary ideologies of left or right. Since the concept of 'festival time' is so deeply bound up with fascism's myth of national regeneration, we should not be surprised if it continues to recur in various guises as part of its crusade against the Enlightenment concept of history.

One of its most influential ideologues in Italy, for example, has been Julius Evola. His impact is largely attributable to the way his occultist theory of reality and arcane philosophy of history satisfy the need experienced by post-war fascists for a comprehensive 'vision of the world' which allows for the subjective sense of access to a 'sacred' time.<sup>[69]</sup> It is the same need which explains the extraordinary way a number of 'fantasy' writers, notably Tolkien have become part of the staple diet of Italian Fascists.<sup>[70]</sup> Sometimes the call for 'festival time' becomes explicit. One of the contributors to a conference held in 1981 by the extreme right on the need to create a new culture for the transmission of their ideas was Franco Cardini. His lecture was entitled 'A quest for the roots of a conception of the world to come. The community is recreating itself: myth, ritual, liturgy, play, festival ('festa')'. In it he asserted that:

To restore 'la festa' means opposing the omnipotence of the capitalist-technological system; it means rediscovering an 'extraordinariness' which acts as a qualifying limit to the everyday, and hence recreating the foundations of everyday reality itself so as to resist the temptation to conceive time as a homogeneous entity and hence life as waiting for inevitable and irreversible destruction, as an anguish which can only be escaped through oblivion. Rediscovering festival time means rediscovering the non-primacy of economism and productionism, it means rediscovering the whole man.<sup>[71]</sup>

There are curious echoes of this theme in a brilliant essay on fascism under the title 'Between festival and revolution' by Marco Tarchi, editor of *Diorama letterario*, one of the foremost organs behind the rethinking of neo-fascist ideology in the 1970s and 80s, and author of a major study of the role of a crisis in 'collective identities' in the fascist seizure of power in Italy and Germany.<sup>[72]</sup> At the end he suggests that the attempt to bring about a temporal revolution through creating a national community is the definitional feature of generic fascism:

The choice of the qualitative and organic community...is a constant of fascist movements transcending the level of historic contingencies to find articulation in the realm of cultural expression in the full sense of the term, namely in political philosophy and doctrine: the myth of the 'community of destiny', the moment of supreme collective identification, and the pivotal concept of the 'new politics' intuited by Mosse and buried by the catastrophe of the Second World War, is both its emblem and its culmination.<sup>[73]</sup>

But north of the Alps too neo-fascism is profoundly preoccupied with breaking out of 'profane time'. One of the most important books in the renewal of fascist thought in Germany, France, and Italy is Armin Mohler's *The Conservative Revolution. A Handbook*. According to his own analysis, the central concern of the inter-war German artists and authors he identifies collectively as the 'Trotskyites of the German Revolution' was the ending of a cycle in an Umschlag (sudden metamorphosis) and rebirth which would finally close the 'interregnum' into which history had decayed since the end of the Second Reich.<sup>[74]</sup> In the 1970s and 1980s many ideologues of the New Right, notably Alain de Benoist in France and Marco Tarchi in Italy, adopted either the Conservative Revolutionary, Nietzschean, 'nominalist' concept of cyclic time, or Julius Evola's mythic, metaphysical alternative to it<sup>[75]</sup> as an integral part of its cultural crusade against the premises of liberal democracy.<sup>[76]</sup> More recently the international New Right (which now extends into Russia) has become increasingly interested in 'Indo-European' concepts of the 'sacred', another symptom of the same palingenetic longings to escape the 'decadent' time which they now identify with the globalization of time and space under the hegemony of the 'American way of life'.

### The implications for fascist studies: the centrality of a sacred time to fascist ideology

This paper has attempted to show that a neglected area of fascist studies concerns the attempts by Fascism and Nazism to engineer a subjective revolution in the experience of time as an integral part of their project to regenerate the nation. It suggests that, while much work exists on the fascist project to create a national community and some scholarly attention is at last being paid to fascist culture, the temporal aspects of both topics have received scant attention. This is no doubt partly because most academics are heirs of the Enlightenment rationalist tradition, and perhaps because the nature of their work means that they tend to operate conceptually from within the subjective confines of individual, profane, normal time, rather than collective, ecstatic, festive, holiday time.

One instance of this neglect is the way Walter Benjamin has been introduced into studies of fascist culture. References to 'the aestheticization of politics' are de rigueur in such studies. Yet I have yet to see a single reference to a passage from his 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' concerning the French Revolution which has a considerable bearing on fascism, despite the fact that it is an essay normally published in the same source as 'The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction' which introduces the concept 'aesthetic politics'. It reads:

History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now ('Jetztzeit'). Thus, to Robespierre ancient Rome was a past charged with the time of the now which he blasted out of the continuum of history. The French Revolution viewed itself as Rome incarnate.

In other words a revolution is a moment when a mythically charged 'now' creates a qualitative change in the continuum of history, which is to be distinguished from undifferentiated 'clock' time, the invisible medium in which all events 'happen'. He goes on:

The awareness that they are about to make the continuum of history explode is characteristic of the revolutionary classes at the moment of their action. The great revolution introduced a new calendar. The initial day of a calendar serves as a historical time-lapse camera. And, basically, it is the same day that keeps recurring in the guise of holidays, which are days of remembrance. Thus the calendars do not measure time as clocks do; they are monuments of a historical consciousness *of which not the slightest trace has been apparent in Europe in the last hundred years*. In the July revolution an incident occurred which showed this consciousness was still alive. On the first evening of fighting it turned out that the clocks in towers were being fired on simultaneously and independently from several places in Paris.<sup>[77]</sup> [my italics]

In the light of what we have suggested about fascism this is an extraordinary statement. Benjamin is writing in 1940. Two European regimes have gone to elaborate lengths to break an entire nation out of a chaotic experience of a history which it was widely felt was becoming mythically discharged and degenerating back into empty time. One was one activating the myth of Rome, and the other the myth of Aryan blood. Both have introduced a new calendar,<sup>[78]</sup> and made it a central goal to fill their subjects' lives with a sense of ritual 'nowness'. So why is Benjamin, who actually lived through the rise of the Nazis till he was forced into exile in 1933, so blind to the fascist bid to shoot down the clocks of liberal time in front of his eyes?

The answer, I believe lies in the way his Marxism paradoxically limited his own comprehension of the brilliant conception of the aestheticization of politics which he had arrived at through his Marxism in the first place. Fascism was not the attempt by capitalists to mystify their retention of power by lining the state apparatus, modern technology, work, the regimentation and exploitation of the masses, and war itself with an artificial 'aura' of magic and aesthetic significance. It was not a pseudo-revolution cynically staged in order to stave off a 'genuine' revolution. For believers in national regeneration fascism was a genuine bid to use the unprecedented resources of the modern state to recreate the 'auratic', the 'magic', the 'numinous' which they sensed was not just draining away from works of art, but from the texture of historical time itself in the inter-war crisis of civilization. It was an attempted revolution, both aesthetic and temporal, the bid to create a new total culture in the sense that the Romans and the Mayans were a total culture, the bid to inaugurate a new era. Had Benjamin realized that the 'aura' that fascists wanted to recreate was of the same stuff that the mythic 'nowness' of the French Revolution was made of, that the aestheticization of politics under fascism was profoundly linked to the explosion of festival time in the French Revolution, then he would have provided himself with a powerful heuristic device to unlock its secrets as a political phenomenon. Instead, the aestheticization of politics implied a film-set reality, which is all that most students of fascism have seen ever since.

This paper contends that if we do not take seriously the fascist attempt to retool the experience of time, the logic underlying the fascist revolution and its terrifying human consequences will continue to elude us. Fascism's concept of society, of human nature, of history, of culture were so perverted by nationalism, militarism, racism, and male chauvinism that the bid to realize the dream was bound to lead in disaster. Nevertheless the failure of fascism and the catastrophes it led to, and would lead to again if it ever seized power,<sup>[79]</sup> should not blind us to the deadly earnestness with which its most fervent supporters sought to carry out its revolutionary mission. We should thus be prepared to devote proper scholarly attention to the fascist jihad against the secular time of liberalism and its attempt to keep at bay 'the terror of history' with a fortress of mythic energies. To build it two regimes forged a formidable alliance between the modern state's powerful arsenal for social engineering and the primordial force of ethnic nationalism and the rebirth myth. The result was the mass-production of 'History', which was only crushed by the conventional forces of history at the expense of millions of lives.

The Italian scholar G. Galli has rightly observed:

There is need for a historical reconstruction of the magic and esoteric component of 'historical fascisms', albeit carried out with the caution stressed by Furio Jesi in his *Cultura di destra* in which he criticises the approach adopted in *The Dawn of the Magicians*, but without the habitual diffidence shown to the topic by traditional historiography'.<sup>[80]</sup>

While this is a worthwhile enterprise, what would contribute even more to the historiography of fascism is a thorough investigation of the 'secular otherworld' at the centre of its imaginings and the 'revolutionary festivals' they led to. Hopefully, this paper has at least helped highlight the relevance and scope of such an undertaking, even if it has also demonstrated how much still remains to be done. In the mean time the regimented oceanic assemblies once held in the Nuremberg Zeppelinfeld have given way to tribal rituals of another, more anarchic kind, in which masses still gather to be welded into a community transcending individual time, but now to the shamanic beats of Paul Okenfold and Oasis.

[E-seminars index](#) | [back to the top](#)

## Endnotes

1. Mona Ouzof, *Festivals and the French Revolution*, (Chicago University Press, 1988).
2. Notably the essays published in the catalogue of the Council of Europe exhibition *Art and Power* (Hayward Gallery, London, 1995), pp. 120-182; Ruth Ben-Ghiat, 'Italian Fascism and the Aesthetics of the "Third Way"', *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 31, No. 2, 1996, *The Aesthetics of Culture*; M. Affron and M. Antliff, *Fascist Visions*, (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1997).
3. Brandon Taylor, Wilfried van der Wil (eds.), *The Nazification of Art; Art and Power*, op.cit., pp. 258-340.
4. Cited (unreferenced) in Chris Bambery, *Killing the Nazi Menace*, Socialist Workers Party, London, 1992, p. 12). Robespierre and Saint-Juste anticipated the deliberate creation of state religions in the twentieth century when they tried to institute a 'cult of the Supreme Being', but their understanding of 'crowd psychology' and the tools of social engineering, propaganda, and state terror at their disposal pall into insignificance when compared to those deployed by the Third Reich.
5. E.g. William Blake, one of whose 'proverbs of Heaven and Hell' reads 'The hours of folly are measured by the clock; the hours of wisdom no clock can measure.' Baudelaire's poem 'L'horloge' in *Les Fleurs du mal*, is also relevant here, its dissection of chronic 'ennui' contrasting so strongly with the ecstatic mood celebrated in a poem such as 'Elevation'. The whole cycle of poems can be seen as an attempt to transform anomic time' into visionary time through the alchemy of poetry (or as Baudelaire himself put it: 'Je prends de la boue, et j'en fais de l'or', 'I take mud and turn it into gold').
6. W. S. F. Pickering, *Durkheim's Sociology of Religion*, (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1984), p. 120. It is revealing that on the eve of the First World War Durkheim hoped that the anomie he felt in the air would be overcome in the near future through a period of 'creative effervescence, in the course of which new ideals will be born and new formulae emerge which will for a time serve as a guide to humanity' (quoted *ibid.*, p. 392).

7. Ibid., chs. 21-2.

8. Max Weber wrote little specifically about the qualitative experience of time, though his wide-ranging research into the contrasts between societies based on religion and secular societies implies a deep interest in the topic, especially given his conviction that the world is essentially meaningless and is given meaning through human values. His observations on the nature of prophetic revelation as the presentation of the world 'as a meaningful totality' has a profound bearing on our theme, since it enables the Nazi use ritual to create a sense of transformation from an incomplete to a complete, whole existence (discussed below) to be seen as a modern travesty of a genuine religious epiphany.

9. E.g. Joseph Campbell, *The Hero's Journey*, (Harper and Row, New York, 1990)

10. See particularly M. Eliade, *The Myth of Eternal Return*, (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1971; first ed. 1949). Eliade was a supporter of the Romanian Iron Guard's quest to regenerate history in the 1930s before becoming a professor of comparative religion in the USA: see F. Jesi, *Cultura di destra*, (Garzanti, Milan, 1979), pp. 38-50.

11. A phrase popularized by H.S. Hughes, *Consciousness and Society*, (MacGibbon and Co., London, 1958).

12. Cf. K.W. Swart, *The Sense of Decadence in Nineteenth-century France*, (International Archives of the History of Ideas, The Hague, 1964; Maurizio Serra, *Al di là della decadenza*, (il Mulino, Bologna, 1994).

13. For a fascinating case-study in just one of these figures see Antonella Bestaggin, 'The Annunciation of Modernity: Giovanni Segantini and the Transcendence of Fin-de-Siecle Pessimism in Italy', *Cummer Studies*, Vol. 1, 1996.

14. Some valuable insights into this aspect of modern culture are offered in S. Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space 1880-1918* (University of Harvard Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1983). See also Robert Hughes, *The Shock of the New*, (BBC, London, 1980).

15. Quoted in Robert Pynsent, *Decadence and Innovation*, (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1989), p. 156.

16. This point emerges clearly from L. Hunt, *Politics, Culture and Class in the French Revolution* (University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1981); R. Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams. Utopian dreams and Experimental life in the Russian Revolution* (OUP, Oxford, 1992); M. J. Lasky, *Utopia and Revolution* (Macmillan, London, 1976).

17. This is a prevalent assumption about the nature of Fascism, best exemplified in Denis Mack Smith, *Mussolini*, (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1981).

18. Jean-Richard Bloch, 'La democrazia e la festa', *La Voce*, 28 July 1914. I have cited Walter Adamson's summary of the article in *Avant-garde Florence. From Modernism to Fascism*, (Harvard University Press, Cambridge Massachusetts, London, 1993), p. 190.

19. Documentation of this vital stage in Mussolini's development as an ideologue are provided by A. J. Gregor, *The Young Mussolini and the Intellectual Origins of Fascism* (University of Chicago Press, Berkeley, 1979), pp. 87-100; Renzo De Felice, *Mussolini il rivoluzionario*, (Einaudi, Turin, 1965); Emilio Gentile, *Il mito dello Stato Nuovo dall'antigiollittismo al fascismo*, (Laterza, Bari, 1982), ch. 3; Walter Adamson, *Avant-garde Florence. From Modernism to Fascism*, op.cit., pp. 141-3.

20. Emilio Gentile, *Il mito dello Stato Nuovo*, op.cit., p. 105.

21. See D. Roberts, *The Syndicalist Tradition in Italian Fascism*, (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1979)

22. See particularly Jeffrey Schnapp's analysis of the nationalist dimension of futurism in his essay 'Forwarding Address', *Stanford Italian Review*, Vol. 8, Nos. 1-2, 1990.

23. F. T. Marinetti, 'The Founding Manifesto of Futurism' (1909), in Umbro Apollonio *Futurist Manifestos*, (Thames and Hudson, London, 1973), pp. 21-2.

24. See particularly Emilio Gentile, 'The Myth of National Regeneration in Italy: From Modernist Avant-Garde to Fascism', in Affron and Antliff (eds), *Fascist Visions*, op.cit.

25. For a sample of the palingenetic expectancy of *squadristi* see the extract from the memoirs of Mario Piazzesi in R. Griffin, *Fascism*, (OUP, Oxford, 1995), pp. 39-40.

26. See M. A. Ledeen, *The First Duce: D'Annunzio at Fiume*, (John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1977). For a sense of D'Annunzio's palingenetic temperament before he developed his own form of fascism see Alfredo Bonadeo, *D'Annunzio and the Great War*, (Associated University Press, Madison/Teaneck, 1995).

27. See Gentile, *Il mito dello Stato Nuovo*, op.cit, p. 108.

28. See Griffin, *Fascism*, op.cit., pp. 28-9.

29. See B. Mussolini, *Fascism: Doctrine and Institutions*, in R. Griffin, *International Fascism. Theories, Causes, and the New Consensus*, (Arnold, London, 1998), pp. 249-50.

30. This position conflicts both with the assumption that Fascism had no ideology maintained by the Denis Mack Smith school of historians, and with those who treat Fascism as a coherent, extensively rationalized doctrine, such as A.J. Gregor and (to a lesser extent) Zeev Sternhell. It is fully consistent, however, with the studies of the Italian scholars Emilio Gentile, *Le origini dell'ideologia fascista* (Laterza, Bari, 1975; 2nd edition Il Mulino, Bologna, 1996), and P. G. Zunino, *L'ideologia fascista* (il Mulino, Bologna, 1985).

31. Griffin, *Fascism*, op.cit., pp. 56-7. Cf. pp. 72-3 'The birth of a new civilization'.

32. Benito Mussolini, 'Political and social doctrine of Fascism', in *Fascism: Doctrine and Institutions* (Arditi, Rome, 1935), reproduced in Griffin (ed.) *International Fascism* op.cit., p. 250.

33. Balbino Giuliano, 'Il fascismo e l'avvenire della coltura' in G. L. Pomba (ed.), *La civiltà fascista*, (Torinese Unione Tipografica Editoriale, Turin, 1928), p. 96.

34. Giovanni Gentile, *Fascismo e cultura* (Fratelli Treves, Milan, 1928), pp. 57-8.

35. G. Gentile, 'The Doctrine of Fascism', *Enciclopedia Italiana* (1932), quoted in A. Lyttleton, *Italian Fascism from Pareto to Gentile*, (Jonathan Cape,

London, 1973), pp. 39-40.

36. *Making the Fascist State*, (Howard Fertig, New York, 1968, (first published 1928), pp. 222-3.

37. *Ibid.*, pp. 223-30.

38. Emilio Gentile, *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy*, (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1996), p. 90.

39. Emilio Gentile, *Il culto del littorio*, (Laterza, Rome, 1993), English trans. *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy*, op.cit.

40. *Ibid.*, *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy*, op.cit., p. 158.

41. *Ibid.* p. 55

42. S. Falasca-Zamponi, *Fascist Spectacle. The Aesthetics of Power in Mussolini's Italy*, (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1997), p. 186

43. *Ibid.* p. 31.

44. Jeffrey Schnapp, 'Epic Demonstrations: Fascist Modernity and the 1932 Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution', in Richard Golsan (ed.) *Fascism, Aesthetics, and Culture*, (University Press of New England, Hanover and London, 1992), p. 30

45. *Ibid.* p. 31

46. See L. Cheles, "'Nostalgia dell'avvenire': The Propaganda of the Italian Far Right between Tradition and Innovation", in L. Cheles, R. Ferguson, M. Vaughan (eds), *The Far Right in Western and Eastern Europe*, (Longman, London, 1995), pp. 41-90.

47. Mabel Berezin, *Making the Fascist Self*, (Cornell, Ithaca, 1997) p. 38.

48. *Ibid.* p. 182

49. A 'fact' which is, of course, dependent on the assumption of the ideal type of fascism which defines it in terms of such a core. See R. Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism* (Routledge, London, 1993).

50. Joachim Fest, *Hitler*, (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1974), p.215

51. Adolf Hitler, *Liberty, Art, Nationhood. Three Addresses delivered at the Seventh National Socialist Congress, Nuremberg, 1935*, (M. Muller and Sons, Berlin, 1936?), pp. 38-39.

52. A major issue raised by this paper but not dealt with is the problem of identifying the line of demarcation between 'genuine' ideology and political ritual on the one hand and propaganda/cynical manipulation on the other. My basic position is that, as in the case of the Catholic Church who created the term, genuine beliefs and ideals (no matter how perverted) underlay the deliberate, and often cynical, mechanisms introduced to propagate the Nazi world-view. The dichotomy can be seen in *Mein Kampf*, which is a work of propaganda, (and contains perceptive insights into the manipulation of the masses), but nevertheless expresses genuinely held beliefs and deeply rooted obsessions.

53. Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, Goettingen, 1971. Vondung provided an English summary of his central thesis in his article 'Spiritual Revolution and Magic: Speculation and Political Action in National Socialism', *Modern Age*, vol. 23, part 4, 1979.

54. *Ibid.*, p. 165. Vondung is citing Robert Lifton.

55. *Ibid.*, p. 164.

56. The most authoritative investigation of the impact of occult ideas of race on the genesis of Nazism is N. Goodrick-Clarke, *The Occult Roots of Nazism*, (The Aquarian Press, Wellington, 1985). The only major occultist dimension of Fascism in the 1930s is to be found in the circle which formed round Julius Evola's 'Traditionalism', which was profoundly influenced by esoteric theories of reality. See Franco Ferraresi, 'Julius Evola: Tradition, Reaction, and the Radical Right', *European Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 28, 1987.

57. H. Rauschnig, *Hitler Speaks*, (Thornton Butterworth, London, 1939), pp. 237-42.

58. E.g. Bergier and Pauwels, *Le Matin des Magiciens* (Gallimard, Paris, 1960), Part Two: 'Some years in the absolute elsewhere'

59. E.g. in a speech to the 1938 Nuremberg Rally Hitler declared that 'National Socialism is not a cult-movement — a movement for worship: it is exclusively a *volkisch* political doctrine based upon racial principles...We will not allow mystically-minded occult folk with a passion for exploring the secrets of the world beyond to steal into our Movement'. Adolf Hitler, *My New Order*, (Angus and Robertson, Sydney/London, 1942), pp. 397-8.

60. Polity Press, Cambridge, 1989 (2 vols.).

61. Eher, Munich, 1929.

62. *Ibid.* vol. 2: 'Male Bodies and the White Terror', pp. 242-43.

63. Iain Boyd Whyte, 'Berlin, 1 May 1936' in *Art and Power* op.cit., pp. 41-8.

64. Duke University Press, Durham and London, 1996.

65. *Ibid.*, pp. 267-8.

66. *Ibid.*, pp. 294-301.

67. BBC 2 Documentary Saturday 9 May 1998

68. For the association between the swastika, the vortex, and the idea of 'autokinesis' or self-generating life, see Malcom Quinn, *The Swastika*, (Routledge, London, 1994), pp. 74-80.

69. See Anna Jellamo, 'Julius Evola: Il pensatore della tradizione', in F. Ferraresi (ed), *La destra radicale*, (Feltrinelli, Milan, 1984).

70. R. Griffin, 'Revolts against the Modern World: The Blend of Literary and Historical Fantasy in the Italian New Right', *Literature and History*, Vol. 11, No. 1, 1985. See also Giorgio Galli, 'La componente magica della cultura di destra'; Alessandro Portelli, 'Tradizione e meta-tradizione: appunti su 'Il Signore degli anelli''; Patrizia Guerra and Marco Revelli, 'Bibliografia essenziale per la conoscenza della nuova destra italiana', in P. Bologna and E. Mana (eds), 'Fascismo oggi. Nuova destra e cultura reazionaria negli anni ottanta', *Notiziario dell'Istituto storico di Resistenza in Cuneo e provincia*, No. 23, (June 1983)
71. 'Alle radici di una concezione del mondo dell'avvenire. La comunità che si ritrova: il mito, il rito, la liturgia, il gioco, la festa', in *Al di là della destra e la sinistra*, (Libreria editrice Europa, Rome, 1981).
72. The essay 'Tra festa e rivoluzione' originally appeared in *Intervento*, 31, (May-June 1978), pp. 113-132, and is reproduced in Griffin, *International Fascism*, op.cit., pp. 264-75.
73. *Ibid.* p. 274.
74. Armin Mohler expatiates on the concept of a qualitative rebirth of time in his *Die Konservative Revolution in Deutschland 1918-1932. Ein Handbuch*, (Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1972), pp. 78-108. His ideas have been extensively influenced by the concept of cultural rebirth elaborated by Nietzsche and Ernst Junger. For a sample in English of the palingenetic mood typical of the protagonists of the Conservative Revolution see Mohler's text 'German Nihilism' in Griffin, *Fascism* op.cit., pp. 351-4.
75. In his *Cultura di destra*, op.cit., Furio Jesi distinguishes 'sacred', 'esoteric' from 'profane', 'exoteric' neo-fascism, a distinction of relevance to much that has preceded. Thus, while Himmler and Evola probed into the notion of a reality 'behind' History, and hence cultivated an 'esoteric' palingenetic myth, the 'indeterminate secular otherworld, "immortal" yet of this world' invoked by the Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution clearly belongs to what Jesi means by a 'profane' concept of time. It should be stressed, however, that even 'profane' neo-fascism postulates a transcendent, meaningful, collective reality beyond that of anomic, individual time. Clearly some work is necessary to refine a discourse, terminology, and taxonomy with which to address the topic of 'fascist time'. Refining distinctions between religious, pseudo-religious and non-religious phenomena would be an integral part of such an exercise. For the moment I prefer to treat fascist time as a (travestied) version of 'sacred' as opposed to 'profane' time, one which usually takes the 'exoteric' form of a hypostatized, profoundly mythic 'History'. On occasions, this 'standard' fascist time can be mixed with elements of an 'esoteric' supra-Historical metaphysics, as glimpsed in Himmler's *Ahenerbe*, the death cult of the Legionaries of the Romanian Iron Guard, or some of the more outlandishly pagan forms of contemporary neo-Nazism, such as the Odinism and Asatru cults in contemporary America — on the latter, see Jeffrey Kaplan, *Radical Religion in America*, (Syracuse University Press, New York, 1997).
76. I examine the New Right's palingenetic myth and its relationship to fascism in the chapter 'Plus ça change! The Fascist Mindset behind the Nouvelle Droite's Struggle for Cultural Renewal' to be published as part of the acts of the conference 'The Extreme Right in France from 1880 to the Present' held in Dublin in February 1998. A draft can be provided on request via e-mail.
77. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, (Fontana Press, London, 1992), pp. 252-3.
78. Some Nazi buildings bore as their date of construction the number of years that had passed since 1933, or what the film *The Triumph of Will* calls in the opening title sequence 'The Year of German Rebirth'.
79. Which is impossible in the structural conditions which currently prevail in Westernized democracies. See Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism*, op. cit., ch. 8.
80. *Fascismo Oggi*, op.cit., p. 286.

[E-seminars index](#) | [back to the top](#)

The Institute of Historical Research (IHR), Senate House, Malet Street, London WC1E 7HU  
The IHR is a member of the School of Advanced Study which is part of the University of London